

# VIRGINIA

## WILDLIFE

FEBRUARY 1987

ONE DOLLAR



I've never been convinced that it's such a bad thing to be last. We puff out with great pride like bearded turkeys in spring woods when anyone mentions how we were the first land to be colonized. We're quick to point out that we're descended from a long line of illustrious "first families." We can talk without end about the first government at Jamestown or the first Thanksgiving.

But we don't talk much about the fact that we were the first state to be explored, the first state to be tromped over and homesteaded. We bore the brunt of the masses that trekked over from Europe into the New World, for they always stopped here before heading West. Out West, trails are not as easy to find, mountains as easily scrambled over, and land as much altered. And a lot of that's because anything that has ever been tried out on the land has been tried here first. We never had a chance to learn from other people's mistakes. Out West, they can look at us and say, "Aah, so that's how they botched their land up. Well, we certainly don't want to do that to our streams, rivers or mountains. We'll learn a lesson from them."

But, despite our misfortune as a learning ground for others, Virginia has been blessed with something quite remarkable. Unlike Westerners with their free-spirited willingness to pick up stakes and move on at the hint of adventure, Virginians like to set up housekeeping and stay put. All the restless types moved on West, while we just dug our feet in and rested. We find a distinct pleasure in surveying the same land year after year, over many years, over generations. And then we like to pass it on to our kin. And I'm thinking that maybe that stubborn tie to the land will be the key to saving our state someday.

I figure that maybe we have the right frame of mind to give us a headstart on buckling down and doing the right thing when it comes down to conservation of the land. Because, for the most part (unless they picked up some nasty carpetbagger blood somewhere along the way), Virginians don't think of making a profit and then moving on, leaving the land to fend for itself.

Here, instead, we have a sense of place. We like retelling old stories of hunting and fishing trips on our land. We love to make memories of connection to the land.

So, I think we've got an ace in the hole that others elsewhere don't have. We've got a lifeline with the land in our minds, in our memories, in our blood. And it just needs to be stirred up every once in a while to keep us doing the land right. That's why I get to feeling that maybe when things get out of whack here and the land starts suffering, it's because people don't know that they're doing the land wrong. After all, a beautiful farm, plowed all the way to the road looks pleasing, tidy and well-cared for, even though it may be as sterile as a parking lot for wildlife.

Or take the trusting landowner who sells off timber on his land to a company that cuts clear down to a stream edge, and tells him it's O.K. for the land. Our Southern upbringing cringes at the thought of questioning someone's moral integrity, especially when it comes to the land. It wouldn't be gentlemanly to wonder if maybe this forester had his pocketbook on his mind rather than his respect for the land and wildlife. That's not to say that all timber companies are out to rape the land. In fact, there are some darn fine companies out there that pride themselves on conserving the land, and it has cost them time and money to maintain that reputation. But the reality of the issue is that whenever it's cheaper and faster to do the *wrong* thing, there's going to be a lot of bamboozlers out there ready to take your money and not look back. So, it takes some caution and some knowledge to do the right thing.

And that's what we're going to try to help you with in *Virginia Wildlife* this year. We're going to make an attempt to "edicate" you. We're going to try to give you some basic knowledge on what's good for your land and what's bad for it. We want to give you enough information so that you can ask the right questions of people who want to use your land, whether it be hunters, fishermen, or timber companies. We want you to learn how to say no, when to say yes, and where you can turn for advice when you're not sure of the options. We want you to realize that the Game Commission is here to give you some answers.

You know, a lot of people are devoting most all their energy to tailing the U.S. Forest Service or the National Park Service in order to make sure they're doing the right thing with public lands. But the way I figure it, with at least 80% of the land in private hands, maybe we should start rolling up our sleeves and doing what needs to be done on our land first. Maybe we should look to our own small piece of property, be it a backyard in a suburb, or a dairy farm in the Blue Ridge. It may be that we'll have to start sacrificing a little profit or a tidy appearance. It may even require a little extra work, back-breaking work, on our parts. But, it seems to me that it's about time we started to shoulder a little *personal* responsibility for passing on a good piece of land to our kin. And Virginians, I believe, come naturally by it.

Dedicated to the Conservation of Virginia's  
Wildlife and Related Natural Resources  
Commonwealth of Virginia  
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# February Issue

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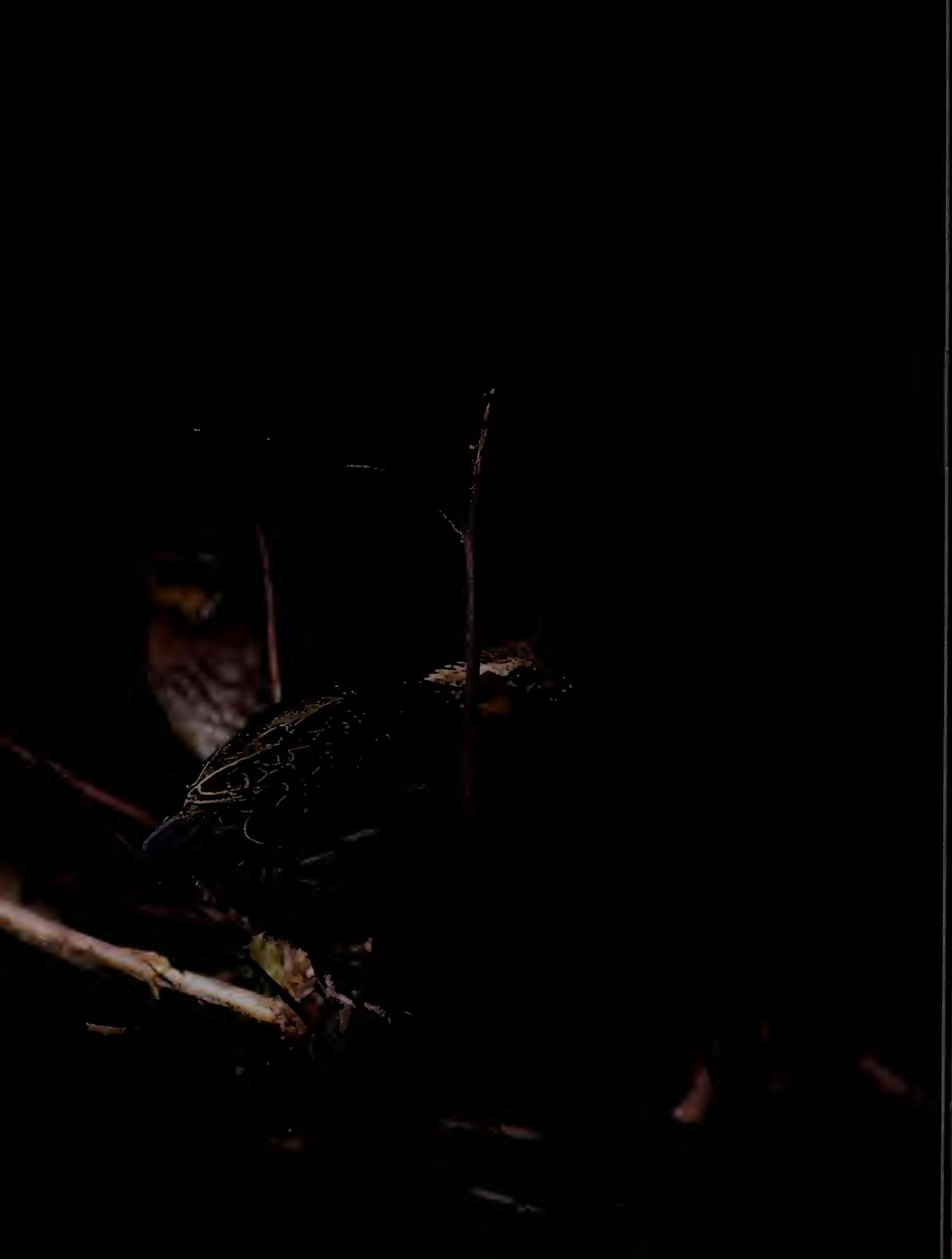


Bobwhite quail need a good place to live like any other animal. Find out what you can do to make a bad place good for the bird. Game Commission biologist Hal Myers gives you the information you need beginning on page 4.

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# Quail . . .

## Bringing Back The Bobwhite

*Many landowners want to know what they can do to bring quail back to their land. Here are some answers.*

by Hal Myers  
photos by Lynda L. Richardson

The basic need for the bobwhite quail is satisfactory habitat. This is simply a condition that provides food and cover at all seasons of the year. It is true that quail have adapted to the changing land use practices in the past, but currently their ability to adapt appears to be dwindling. As a result, populations have dropped, quail are hard to come by, and many quail hunters have switched to another sport. It might be said that old quail hunters are comparable to old soldiers, they never die, they just fade away. This current situation is not good and did not happen overnight, but what more can be expected when the home for quail has been drastically disturbed?

In recent years the question is forever being asked, what is being done for the quail or what can I do to have more quail on my property? First of all, let's be realistic about the quail habitat conditions in Virginia at the present time. You don't have to look too closely at our countryside to observe the drastic loss of good quail habitat. Modern land use practices have produced a clean farming type operation which is a result of larger and better farm machinery, double cropping, the livestock

Some of the best examples of the Game Commission's land manipulation for quail can be found at:

**Elm Hill Wildlife Management Area**, about 16 miles southwest of South Hill in Mecklenburg County. Contact Danny Johnson, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 804/738-6044.

**Powhatan Wildlife Management Area**, 33 miles west of Richmond in Powhatan County. Contact Stanley Patterson, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 804/598-3706.

**Amelia Wildlife Management Area**, about 10 miles northeast of Amelia Courthouse bordering the Appomattox River. Contact David Ellinghausen, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 804/561-3350.

**Chester F. Phelps Wildlife Management Area**, in Culpeper and Fauquier counties off U.S. 17. Contact Robert Henson, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 703/439-8506.

**White Oak Mountain Wildlife Management Area**, in Pittsylvania County, approximately five miles southeast of Chatham. Contact Jessie Robertson, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 804/432-1377.

**Chickahominy Wildlife Management Area**, about 12 miles southeast of Providence Forge on the eastern edge of Charles City County. Contact David Brime, Wildlife Management Area Supervisor, 804/829-5336.

*Opposite: Bobwhite quail need places to hide, which fescue pastures and clean farming don't provide.*

industry, no till, and herbicides. This also applies to many of the small farms which were once considered best for quail, since many of these are now leased to large operators and the same clean type conditions exist. It's just pure and simple; none of a quail's habitat requirements are provided on a clean type operation, especially where all of the natural areas and hedgerows have been removed.

Along with the present land use conditions, a tremendous amount of open land has been converted to fescue grass, mainly for cattle. Fescue has become quite popular, since it is not expensive to establish and grows on most any type soil. Other than possibly providing some insects, however, it is of little value to quail. Quail do not eat the seeds, and the cover that it provides is usually so dense that it is of no value at any season of the year. Birds cannot maneuver through the grass canopy that it creates, especially when mature stands fall over and bend to the ground. Fescue also has a tendency to spread on its own, and many idle acres that appear to be good quail areas are fast becoming solid fescue sods. When a quail hunter's territory changes to fescue, he had better make other plans. Otherwise, he may as well leave the



*Bird hunters find quail hunting a failing sport these days.  
There just aren't many birds to be found.*

gun on the rack and the dogs in the pen.

With present conditions being as they are, the future for quail does not look good. Don't expect to find quail populations as they used to be or plan on obtaining a daily bag limit without a little effort. However, we need to take heed to the current situation, and make an effort to provide the necessary habitat wherever possible.

On wildlife management units throughout the state, management practices are applied to benefit all wildlife species present. But, these areas consist of a limited acreage of the state, which leaves over 80 percent of our wildlife to be found on privately owned land. Improving these areas must be emphasized to benefit the statewide situation.

In quail management, the most practical approach is to give first consideration to nature's way of supplying needs. Idle lands, fencerows, field corners, hedgerows, stream banks, or just any odd area are often sufficient for quail and can supply the year round requirements if protected. Native grasses, weeds, and brush can be expected in such areas and can provide both cover and food. Some of the most common and preferred natural plants are: broom sedge, native lespedezas, partridge pea, beggar's lice, ragweed, briars, honeysuckle, hay, wild plum, grape, cedar and wild cherry. Practically all of these can be expected to appear on any protected idle area. Very often fencing is necessary for protection, but it remains a practical and economical approach to management.

In normal farming operations, the simplest way to provide supplemental habitat for quail is to leave unharvested portions of crops. These crops may include any seed-producing annuals, such as corn, millet, rye, wheat, barley, sorghum, soybeans, and grass and legume hay. A minimum of two to four outside rows is recommended, and to be of value, they must be managed and treated as a practice with a purpose. In other words, these areas are of no value if trampled by machinery or grazed. In addition, residues from these same harvested crops can provide food for quail and other wildlife.

Supplemental plantings to meet quail requirements are necessary when there is an absence of native food and cover or a shortage of crop residues that are left available in a farming operation. Since intensive quail management can become expensive when figured from the return per acre basis, the planting of perennials seems to be the best route in establishing permanent quail areas.

Recommended perennial plantings are: shrub lespedeza, serecia lespedeza and autumn olive. Shrub lespedeza (VA-70) fits well into conservation farming and can be used to establish plots in odd areas and field borders. Plots can be established from both seed and plants, and they require little maintenance. To maintain maximum seed production, they should be cut back or clipped every three years and top-dressed with fertilizer. The seed is a favorite of quail, especially during late winter and early spring, and these plantings also provide good shelter or cover areas.

Autumn olive provides both food and cover. It, too, can be used for planting odd areas and field borders and establishing a thicket type habitat that provides abundant food and also shelter for loafing, dusting, and roosting.

Serecia lespedeza is a perennial, well-adapted to growing along fence borders, gulleys, road banks, and any idle area. It is an excellent plant for stabilizing the soil and stopping erosion. Although it is not a preferred quail food, it has been found to provide excellent cover for nesting, roosting, and escape, if it doesn't become too dense.

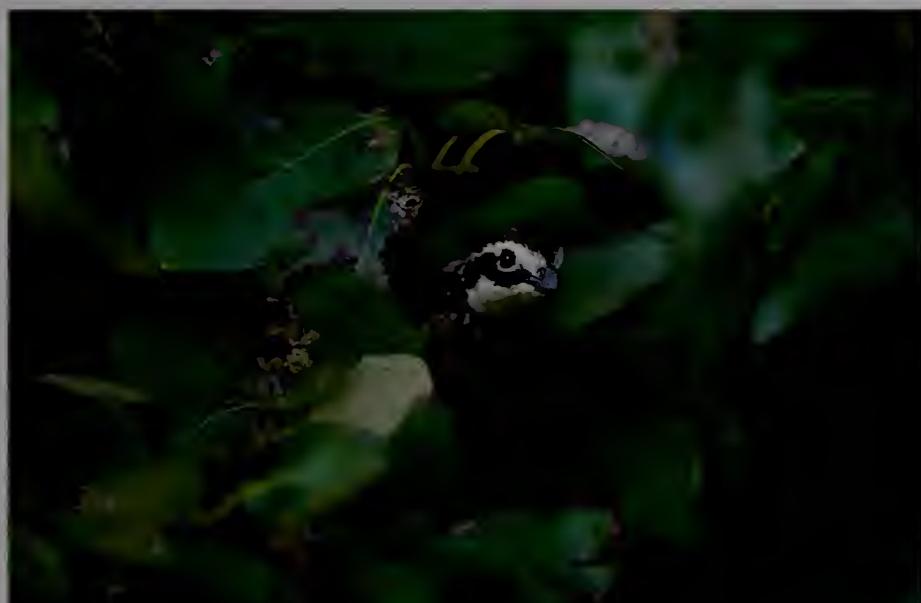
The most popular quail planting over the years has been the annual game bird mixture consisting of millets, (German, proso, brown top, Japanese), soybeans, milo, and Korean lespedeza. Quick results are found from these plantings, because seeds are produced early and quail utilization is almost guaranteed at some times during the fall and winter. Korean lespedeza will reseed itself for several years, but the other seed in such a mixture are a "one shot" deal, and have to be reseeded each year.

Top dressing of lespedeza (Korean and Kobe) is the most economical of

all supplemental quail plantings to provide food. It's a heavy seed-producing plant that rates high among preferred quail food, is adapted to most soils that aren't extremely wet, and can be established by broadcasting on top of the ground in February and March or even up to April 15, with no seed bed preparation. Hard ground should be harrowed or disked to provide for good germination.

Dense seedings are not required for quail. In fact, birds maneuver better,

This same type of top-seeding has been proven with Japanese millet, except that the millet must be seeded at a later date after the soil has warmed up (3-4 weeks after the last killing frost). Good stands can be obtained by top seeding as late as July 15, since only 60 days are required for plants to mature and produce seed, providing the soil is exposed by disking or burning. As with annual lespedeza, small areas can be seeded to a solid stand and large areas in a strip pattern.



*With some wise habitat manipulation, including the planting of such shrubs as lespedeza and autumn olive, and the retention of hedgerows and even crop strips, we may be able to hear more of the bobwhite in the future.*

and prefer stands that are not too thick. Instead of the recommended 15 to 25 lbs. per acre recommended for agricultural purposes, 10-12 lbs. per acre is sufficient for a good quail planting. Reseeding can be anticipated for several years on suitable soils under 2,500 ft. elevation. Preferred areas for seeding to lespedeza would be fallow fields or any odd areas that lack dense grass cover, areas that are site prepared for reforestation, utility right of ways, or just any idle area that is not subject to erosion. In large openings, such as big idle fields or areas that have been site prepared for reforestation by burning, it isn't necessary to seed the entire area. Usually, a border seeding and strips 50 to 100 yards apart will be sufficient for quail needs.

The bobwhite soybean is a fairly new variety that could have great impact on quail management. It is a small bean that quail prefer and also is a heavy seed producer. This, too, is a reseeding annual if properly maintained by disking or mowing, and works well when seeded alone or in a mixture.

Technical assistance in management planning is available on request to the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries by the Game Division's staff of wildlife biologists. Shrub lespedeza is available in the spring from your local Virginia Department of Forestry Office for \$8.00 per 50 plants. Orders should be placed during early fall or winter. □

Hal Myers is a district Game Commission biologist in south-central Virginia.



# A Catamount Tale

Virginia's mountain lion stories cause one to pause and wonder. But the presence of cougars in the state has not been documented—is it just a matter of time?



by Nancy Hugo  
photos by William Lea

**D**on't try to tell Tony Groah there are no cougars in Virginia. Groah was hunting with his twin brother near Vesuvius in Rockbridge County when he came across signs of a struggle in the snow. The brothers followed the disturbed snow to the edge of Big Mary's Creek where a cougar and a small doe had fallen off the high bank together. The cougar "took off runnin'." The doe was still alive when they reached it but died soon of wounds to its neck.

Although they saw the cat for only about 15 seconds, the brothers are sure it was a cougar. "We've both seen a lot of bobcats," says Tony Groah. "This

was no bobcat. The tail was 16 inches or more."

Groah thinks the sound of the stream may have masked their approach and allowed them to get within 15 yards of the animal.

The next day, Tony and his brother went back to the spot hoping to see the cougar again. At first, they thought the deer carcass had been removed, but they "got to kickin' around in the leaves" and found it. It was perfectly covered with leaves as if the cougar had taken the leaves one by one and covered it up. One leg was partially devoured.

The Groah report is only one of hundreds of cougar sightings reported

Cougars in Virginia—fact or fiction?



Some people believe without a doubt that they have seen cougars in Virginia. The problem is that they haven't produced the evidence to convince experts. No one has been able to produce even a photograph to lay doubts to rest.

to the Virginia Game Commission since the 1960s. In 1986 alone there were reliable sightings in Orange, Craig, Bedford, Botetourt, Nelson, and Amherst counties. That's a lot of sightings of an animal supposedly eliminated from the mid-Atlantic region by the late 1800s.

Are cougars becoming re-established in Virginia?

"I don't know," says Joe Coggin, Virginia's reigning cougar expert with the Game Commission who has been investigating cougar sightings in Virginia for 20 years. It's a well-worn answer from a game biologist who has obviously learned how to mitigate between people who have seen cougars and wildlife experts who say there is absolutely no evidence of cougars in Virginia. Coggin maintains his scientific integrity by refusing to say there are cougars in Virginia until he has indisputable evidence: a hair, a track, sign, a picture, or a carcass. So far no one has come up with any of these, but still the sightings pour in.

Coggin has recorded 121 reliable sightings of cougars in Virginia since 1970. For every reliable sighting there were two that he considered unreliable. Not included in that number either are at least three sightings never recorded from Buckingham County where, as may often be the case, no one considered calling the game warden. Other sightings may never be reported because people are afraid of what other

people may think. Cougar sightings, according to some, are at the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

"Some people think reporting a cougar is like reporting a flying saucer," says Coggin. "They're afraid we'll think they're crazy."

Patricia Hurst has no such fear and can't wait to say "I told you so" when the cougar's presence in Virginia is finally confirmed. There were two other people with her when she saw a cougar stalking a deer near her Orange County farm. Her report and a cluster of others center around Clark Mountain near the Rapidan River. Their eyewitness reports speak for themselves:

Patricia Hurst: *The first time I saw it was 13 years ago. Everyone laughed at me. Everybody said 'you're out of your mind.' I saw it several times afterward. Then, five or six years ago, I was with Mr. Layton and my son Arthur. We were driving along the road when we saw the cougar in a field. Deer were grazing nearby. Its tail was twitching. You know how a cat's tail twitches? It was in a stalking position ready to pounce. The three of us sat and watched it until it got too dark to see.*

We told two game wardens about it but neither believed us. My son was in school at Virginia Tech and he told his professor, but he didn't believe him. Now my son's a vet in Lynchburg. He's assisted in surgery on a cougar at the Lovington Animal Hospital, and, believe me, he knows what one looks like.

Dr. Arthur Hurst: Yes, definitely. We have cougars. I've seen them about three times. The last time was three or four months ago. That was at a road crossing in daylight. The weather was clear and all that. The cougar was on Rt. 636 near Clark Mountain angling across the road. He shot down the bank ahead of me, and appeared a bit lame. He didn't have a normal gait. Before that, I saw one going across the road in the summer of 1980 or 1981. I saw just its hindquarters, then it went into the brush, but the tail is very distinctive.

The first time I saw it was in 1979 or 1980 at Hare Forest on Rt. 700. I saw the whole animal going through a field. Deer were at a distance, and the cougar was moving toward the deer. It was going a bit fast for a real stalk, but deer were there and the cougar was there.

It wasn't a dog or a bobcat. There's nothing exactly like the low-slung body and very distinctive tail of a cougar. The movement is different also.

Francis Layton: I know they're around here. The last time I saw it was five weeks ago (Sept. 1986). I spotted it snaking along a fence row. And believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I'm not any daydreamer.

It was in the evening about 6:00. It weighed about 160 pounds, and it was long, tawny colored, with a long tail. I've heard it scream around here like a person, and where it's urinated has a bad smell. You'll never forget the scream once you've heard it.

*Calvin Davis: I saw one six or seven years ago on Twin Mountains in Culpeper County (across the river from Clark Mountain). It's a rocky area with big boulders. I was hunting and I saw him try to catch a deer. I was watching three deer under a beechnut tree when he lunged for him. He was the height of a good size bird dog.*

*I didn't tell people for a long time. I never mentioned it. I figured people would say 'he's nuts.'*

Reports like these come into Coggin by the dozens. If they are fresh—no more than a day or two old—he will search for tracks or other sign, but as often as not, the reports are a month old before he gets them.

"The only evidence of cougars in Virginia," says Coggin, "is the reports from people I consider good observers and reliable people. There is no evidence from the field. It's hard for me to say sincere people are deceived, but it's hard to say we do have them."

According to Coggin, even good reliable people can be deceived. Dogs, deer, and bobcats are most often mistaken for cougars. Even a feral cat can sometimes reach 30 pounds and may be perceived as larger. Sightings are also often reported at the edge of day or in the headlights of a car when conditions are not ideal for viewing.

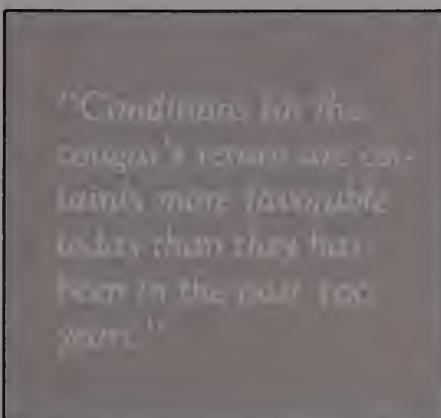
To differentiate a reliable report from an unreliable one, Coggin listens to the description of how the cat behaved, how it looked, how much it weighed. "If they say it barked," he laughs, "I don't check it out." He is also suspicious of reports of black cougars. "A cougar has never been known to be black," he says.

Tracks can also be confusing. The difference between a dog track and a cougar track is not always observable without several tracks or a clear plaster cast.

"You can go into any old dog pen in the U.S. and find a good cougar track," says Coggin. "The paw can go down in such a way that it won't show the claws. The dog can land funny and the toes be rounded off. You've got to have more than one track to be sure."

Evidence that does suggest the presence of cougars are covered deer kills, but even that evidence isn't foolproof.

A cougar will cache a deer for a later meal by covering it with leaves and debris, but sometimes a bobcat will do the same thing with a fawn. It's unlikely a bobcat could drag and cover a full-grown deer, but some wildlife biologists say that the rare bobcats that do cover deer are more numerous than supposed cougars.



Screams may be the least reliable evidence. Screech owls, bobcats, foxes, feral cats, and even fawns in distress may be mistaken for cougars, although anyone who has heard what he believes to be a cougar scream is not likely to believe it is one of the more likely alternatives. "Blood-curdling," "chilling," "hair-raising," "like a child or woman in distress" are common descriptions of cougar screams, but the same descriptions are often applied to other animals.

So frustrated are some people in their attempts to get wildlife experts to believe they've seen or heard cougars that they've threatened to kill the cougar if they ever encountered one again. Not only would that be a tragedy for this endangered species, but it's a federal offense punishable by one year in prison and a \$20,000 fine. What Joe Coggin wants instead is a good photograph of a cougar with an identifiable background. "And be sure the tail is showing," he says.

Irrefutable evidence of the cougar's presence in Virginia would answer only the first of the important cougar questions: Are they here? Once a cougar is found, the question remains as to where the cougar came from. Could it have somehow been undetected all these years and part of the original

native populations or has it migrated from Florida, the only eastern state with a recognized cougar population? Cougars also breed well in captivity and those in Virginia might well have been released. More than one person I talked to about cougars thought the Game Commission had released cougars in Virginia. Not so, says an emphatic Joe Coggin.

Conditions for the cougar's return are certainly more auspicious today than they have been in the past 100 years. By the late 1800s, deer, the mainstay of the cougar's diet, were at an all-time low and the cougar had vanished from most sections of the eastern U.S. Deer did not become widespread again until the 1930s-1950s. Today, the deer population is burgeoning and cougars are protected by law.

It is these favorable conditions and the number of hunters in the woods, however, that make Commission game biologist Hal Meyers think that if Virginia had cougars, one would have been taken illegally by now. "I just don't think we have cougars in this state," he says. Bob Glasgow, wildlife biologist for the George Washington National Forest agrees. "I'd bet a wad we don't have them," he says. The last confirmed killing of a cougar in Virginia was in Washington County in 1882, although Max Ailor, retired outdoors editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, remembers seeing a picture in a Culpeper paper of a cougar killed and strung up around 1950.

Probably the most extensive search for cougars on the East Coast was conducted by Robert Downing for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Beginning in 1978, Downing spent six years tracking down cougars and cougar reports to establish the status of cougars in the East. He found evidence that a few cougars may have survived the critical period between 1900 and 1930 when deer were scarce, and he believes as many as 20 cougars may have been killed in or near the mountains of Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina during the last 50 to 80 years. Nevertheless, after tracking down hundreds of cougar reports, he found only one track

# *A flicking tail, a long-whiskered face... there's a lot more to a cougar than meets the eye.*

If the cougar is returning to Virginia, there is cause for celebration, but it's even more fun to imagine he's been here all along. There's something appealing about the biggest cat in North America eluding the experts for almost 100 years. If any big cat could do it, the cougar probably could.

For centuries only the barest facts were known about cougars because they are so elusive. They have extremely keen senses of sight, smell, and hearing and disappear at the merest hint of man. One tale has it that a western hunter tracked cougars 40,000 miles, killed or captured 668, but never once saw a cougar that hadn't been treed by a dog.

In the absence of information, rumors abound, and the cougar became known as a wanton killer whose footsteps made no sound and whose screams paralyzed its prey. Teddy Roosevelt did nothing to improve that reputation when he called the cougar "a big horse-killing cat, the destroyer of deer, the lord of stealthy murder facing his doom with a heart both craven and cruel." At the same time, however, some biologists who kept cougars in captivity were describing them as playful and shy. The truth may lie somewhere in between as one naturalist suggested in 1912: "After 31 years of more or less constant association with the beast, I have arrived at the conclusion that the cougar is the most incongruous mixture of courage and cowardice, boldness and stealth, wisdom and inbecility of any animal that runs wild."

Puma, deer tiger, panther, painter, mountain lion, and catamount are all names that have been applied to the cougar. Although there are local races and subspecies, the eastern cougar, *Felis concolor*, is generally tawny colored with black on the tip of its tail, back of its ears, and around its white muzzle. An average adult cougar weighs about 130 pounds, but the largest male on record weighed 276 pounds. A large male may be 9 feet long (1/3 of that tail) and 2½ feet tall at the shoulder.

Cougars live in mountains, deserts, jungles, and swamps, and at one time their range extended from northern Canada to southern South America. Three hundred years ago they were the most prevalent predator in North America.

A female cougar generally ranges well over 30 miles, but recent studies in the West suggest that the male's range can be 100 square miles or more. One wildlife biologist who marked a two-month-old cougar in Wyoming found it killed two and a half years later in Aurora, Colorado—300 air miles away. Evidently there are transient

cougars who drift far and wide until they can find an unoccupied territory. Their travels suggest that all the sightings in Virginia could be accurate and still the number of cougars in the state be very small.

The cougar is primarily nocturnal, but western hunters report that they hunt almost as much during the day as at night. Early morning and late afternoon are probably the most likely times to see cougars stalking deer.

Although deer are the cougar's primary prey, when they need to, cougars will eat squirrels, rats, porcupines, and other small animals as well as livestock. The cougar stalks his prey on the ground and generally gets close enough for a short sprint before pouncing onto its back. A cougar can knock over a deer and kill it with a bite to the neck in a matter of seconds.

Cougars are extremely solitary and come together only for mating. The mated pair stays together only about 16 days. Mating can occur at any time of year, and the female signals her availability with a bloodcurdling scream. Some researchers, however, say they've never heard a cougar scream and that the species should be known more for its silence than for its screams.

A fallen log, cave, thicket, or rocky shelter makes an appropriate den for the female who bears a litter of one to five spotted kittens every two to three years. The kittens are born 90 days after conception and stay with the mother until they are about two years old. At that time the mother forces her offspring out of her territory.—N.H.



*More often than not, people mistake deer, dogs and bobcats for cougars in Virginia. It's especially easy to do, since most sightings occur at dusk or in the headlights of automobiles.*

and one scat suspected of being made by cougars.

"I am not aware," he wrote, "that any of the reports I have received were purposely fabricated or embellished, yet I am intrigued by the tendency of witnesses who get only a fleeting glimpse of an animal to make a split-second interpretation that it was the rarest animal in the East rather than a common one. Several individuals have told me that their first identification of an approaching animal was dog or deer, and that they had to change that impression as the cougar came closer. To these cases, I assign a high probability of accuracy. I also assign a high probability to those few cases (less than half a dozen) in which the witness told me about seeing the tail flicking, since this is a behavior that is seldom publicized."

In West Virginia, Downing found an indistinct cougar track in a mud-puddle, which, when considered with other evidence (nearly scat, sighting by a highly experienced biologist the year before, and recent predation on sheep) suggested cougar presence there, but he concluded that he would need a more distinct track to prove it.

In the end, Downing's conclusions are as guarded as Joe Coggins', but he doesn't rule out the possibility of cougars.

"Despite several years of intensive effort funded by the U.S. government," wrote Downing, "the author has been unable to positively confirm that there

are self-sustaining populations of cougars in the eastern United States north of Florida. . . All that I have been able to prove in six years of effort is that proof of their existence is difficult to obtain. . . The future prospects of demonstrating conclusively that breeding populations of cougars exist in the eastern United States are not good. Most of the evidence is questionable at best. Some of the evidence is strong, particularly sightings by trained biologists or conservationists, but it is insufficient in itself as proof. The animals, if they exist, must be rare, elusive, difficult to track, and do not maintain breeding territories. The matter will probably remain unresolved until definite kills, substantiated by evidence that the animals in question were not released pets, convince biologists and conservation agencies that the cougar exists and breeds in a wild state in the eastern United States. . . I must conclude, unless we accept the unlikely possibility that everyone who reported seeing a cougar in the East was mistaken, that the animal has existed in small numbers in several areas at least within the last 10 years."

It may have been a mated pair or a mother and her offspring that Larry Carpenter saw in 1978 when he was hunting in the Shenandoah mountains near Harrisonburg. It is his account that even those most skeptical of the cougar's presence in Virginia find difficult to dismiss. Carpenter is an experienced outdoorsman and son of retired

biologist Max Carpenter.

Carpenter was squirrel hunting in Hone Quarry Hollow when he sighted an animal in the four-power scope of his 22-caliber rifle. He was about 50 yards away.

"I could see its neck. It was turned looking back. I thought it was a deer at first because of the color. Then it turned and I could see its face. It was obviously not a deer. I was shocked to see an animal I'd never seen before in our mountains.

"It walked into an opening so I had a clear view of its entire body. It appeared to be an adult cougar. It had the swaying paunch and long tail that dipped almost to the ground. It stood there until another one walked up behind it. That one was smaller, redder in color, and appeared to be immature. The two of them moved slowly on up the ridge and out of sight. I didn't think of them as walking—they slid out of sight."

One wonders how long it will be before a cougar slides into the range of a camera or there is other proof of the cougar's existence in Virginia. It seems imminent to me, but then that's what Joe Coggins thought when he first started collecting cougar reports 20 years ago. Maybe the most reassuring thought for those of us who'd like to prove there are cougars in Virginia is this: as hard as it is to prove they are here, it's impossible to prove that they're not. □

Nancy Hugo is a freelance outdoor writer who lives in Ashland.

**O**ne problem we Virginians have is we never really know when the fishing season ends. Unlike salt water anglers who must depend upon the comings and goings of a host of migratory fish, the freshwater fisherman can stay in business the year round. Come late fall or early winter when we return from a fishing trip, the next one can be next week, next month or next spring, depending upon the weather. Because of this, it is tricky to set a date that signifies the end of the fishing season.

When you put away your tackle after a fishing trip and don't see it again for months, lots of funny things can happen inside the tackle box. A plastic worm may be draped over a plug and will spend the winter enjoying a peculiar relationship, called a chemical reaction. The upshot of all this is the worm eats the finish off the plug.

Some guys don't let their crankbaits dry off before they toss them back into the tackle box. Damp baits lead to rusty hooks, and rusty hooks can stain lure bodies an ugly rust brown color.

Plastic or rubber skirts on lures have a way of drying out or rotting. There are bent hooks to replace, dulled hooks to sharpen, leaky crankbaits to fix, bits of line to clip from lure eyes and a messed up tackle box to reorganize.

One way to tackle the problem is to start by completely emptying the tackle box. Once the box is empty, clean it out thoroughly. If rust has accumulated in the lure compartments, wipe it out with a rag. Try WD-40 on the rag. If this doesn't do the job, use a little paste type chrome polish.

Tackle boxes that were used in salt water are particularly vulnerable to corrosion. Such boxes should never be allowed to remain open aboard a boat because salt spray will get into them and virtually eat up tackle.

Starting with the crankbaits, examine each one. If hooks are bent or rusty, replace them with new hooks. Check hooks for sharpness by running the points over a fingernail. If they don't dig in, they're dull. Sharpen them.

If rusty hooks have stained the lure body with rust, remove all of the hooks and clean the lure with a paste type chrome cleaner.

If you find hollow lures that have

# Tackle Tinkering

*This is the time to empty  
your tackle box, polish those  
hooks, and clean up those lures.  
Fishing season isn't too far away.*

by Jack Randolph

sprung a leak and have taken on water, place the lures in a freezer for a few hours and then stick them, one at a time, into warm water. A stream of bubbles will identify where the lure is leaking. I generally drill a hole at the point of the leak so that all of the water in the lure drains out. Then I patch it with epoxy cement.

Be sure that all soft plastic baits are separated by color and each color placed in a separate plastic bag. This

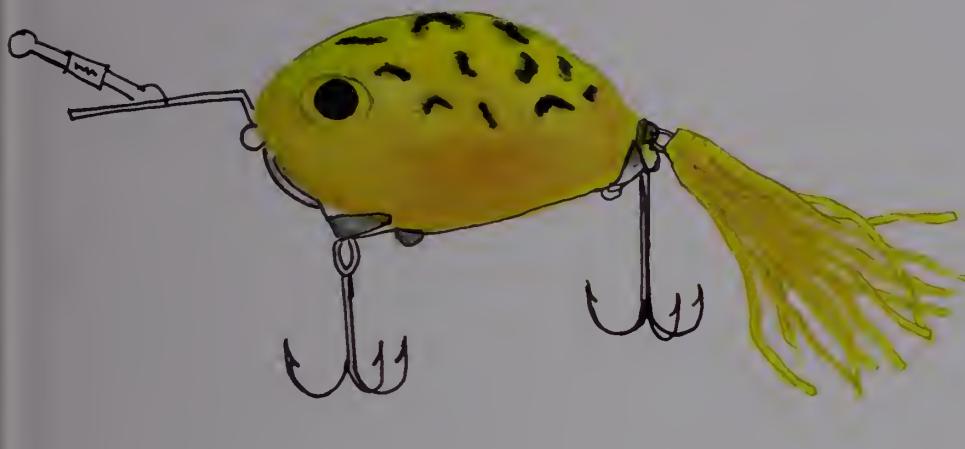
prevents the different colors from running together. Also, lures with rubber or plastic skirts should be stored in plastic bags to extend the life of the skirts.

Check each lure in your collection carefully, removing all snaps or tag ends of line that may be attached to them.

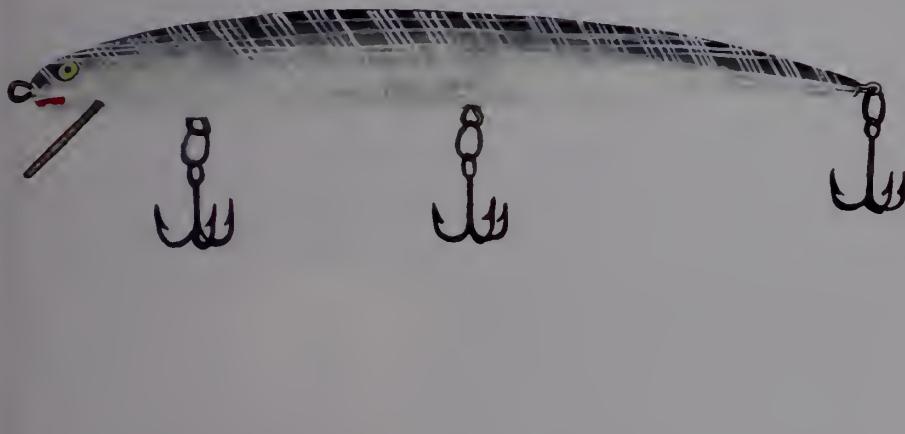
Spinners should be checked to ensure the blades and bodies are still shiny. A good metal polish can restore

illustrations by Cindie Brunner

Lures with rubber or plastic skirts should be stored in plastic bags to extend their lives.



Hollow lures, like the one pictured below, can be repaired with epoxy cement if they spring a leak.



Each year the hooks on crankbaits should be sharpened or replaced if bent or rusty.



spinners to like new condition.

Bottles of pork rind or pork chunks should not be stored in the tackle box. Despite one's best efforts, these bottles find a way of leaking and corroding half of the contents of the box.

When purchasing hooks to use as replacements, it is more economical to purchase them in boxes of fifty. One hook manufacturer, VMC, makes a treble hook that snaps on to the hook hangers, thus eliminating the need to unscrew off the old hook. Most bass plugs are equipped with No.4 treble hooks.

When replacing hooks, replace with the same size to avoid destroying the action and balance of the lure. It really makes no difference whether bronze or nickel replacements are used. I believe the brighter hooks actually add more fish appeal to the lure.

Dry flies that have become matted or flattened in storage can be restored by exposing each one on a tweezer to the steam escaping from a kettle. The feathers will fluff out instantly, but the flies should be dry before they are returned to storage.

Fly lines should be removed from the reels and organized into loose loops. This prevents them from becoming kinked and difficult to cast when next used.

Reels should be stored with the drags completely loosened. Any reels requiring repair should be put in the shop now to avoid the last minute rush. This is also true of rods.

Another pleasant chore is inventorying snaps, hooks, swivels and other gear to ensure you have what you need next time you go fishing. Also check your life preservers, fire extinguisher, flares and other gear to ensure everything is serviceable. The three-year expiration date on flares should be checked, and when you buy replacements make sure the dates stamped on them give you a full three years before they expire.

The work you accomplish this winter will pay off next time you go fishing. You will discover that a little preparation adds a great deal to your fishing fun. □

Jack Randolph is the assistant director of the Game Commission and an avid fisherman.

# All in the Name

A Brittany field trial may be a serious endeavor, but in reality the competition boils down to good clean fun.

**P**aul Stoddard leans back in his saddle. A cold mist, blowing across a field of high grass, collects in drops that hang from the bill of his hat. He surveys the rolling fields with a hard gaze. "Sometimes it gets a mite raw out here."

The clear, sunny skies of fall have been replaced overnight by a blanket of wet, November grayness that dips down and swirls in the tops of trees. The mists soak man and dog to the bone and both shivered constantly. It's hard for this newcomer to believe that this is all in the name of fun.

The reason that Stoddard and others are out on such a day is a Brittany field trial. The Brittany is a medium-sized, short-tailed bird dog infected with a cheerful disposition. A field trial is an organized competition spread over two days, regardless of weather, where dogs are judged on their ability to find game birds.

My wife grew up showing Brittanys at dog shows and field trials with her father. Having heard of the fall Brittany



# of Fun

by Tim Wright  
photos by Lynda Richardson



trial, sponsored by the Tidewater Brittany Club, she was eager to introduce me to the fun. For weeks she charmed me with her childhood memories. Her eyes lit up as she spoke of springtime fish frys, horse rides in the snow and always the joy of watching her Brits perform. How was I to refuse such an offer? I couldn't.

The day of the trial arrived, but the festivities started the night before with the arrival of the winnebagos, pickup trucks towing horse trailers and cars with tents on the roof. They came from New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky, converging on the Game Commission's Amelia Wildlife Management Area. Together, the hardy ones set up camp for the weekend, while the faint-hearted headed for the nearest hotel and a hot shower.

Despite their far flung homes, most of those gathered seem to know each other. As they talked, they mentioned dogs by name, whether their own or someone else's. Each Brit they referred to was easily separated from any other Brit. "Yeah, I remember that dog. He's got a helluva nose. Holds his head real high and he's steady as a rock."

Despite the chill and damp, the early morning air of competition had a lingering cheeriness about it. The smell of sausage wafted across the compound. Cups of steaming hot chocolate or coffee were cradled in cold hands as everyone prepared for the day. A small cinderblock building, being used as combination kitchen and office, quickly became the day's center of activity as people drifted in and out seeking food or warmth.

A young Brittany sitting out back of the building tied to a small camper-trailer whined and cried for attention as it shivered. In the distance, lined up along the edge of a small rise and away from the general gathering of men and dogs, Brits chained together formed a barking line of orange and white

excitement.

A young Brittany, straining against its leash, led its master to the starting point on the edge of a field for the day's first brace of the trial. Waiting impatiently, the Brit reared up on its hind legs, nearly choking from the pull on its leash. The Brit's master, engaged in conversation with a man on horseback, mindlessly stroked the dog's head to the wagging of its short, stubby tail. The Brit whined, testing its leash, eager to search the waiting fields for wild and released quail.

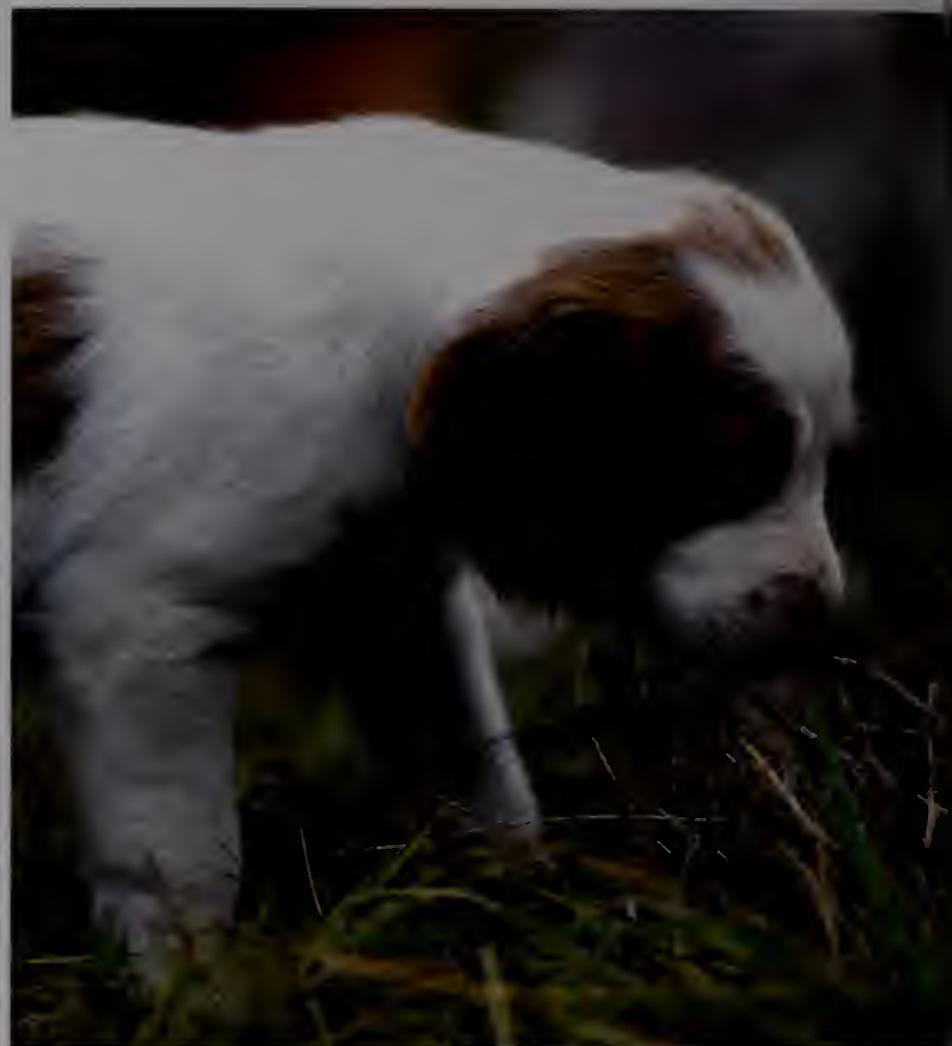
A second Brittany is brought up. Like nervous humans, both animals strain and throw quick glances all around, barking at nothing, at everything. With the blast of a whistle, both charge off down the path, the pounding of hooves and the shouts of men close behind. Dog and horse quickly disappear into a shroud of dampness. The voice of a handler comes out of the mist "Ho! Ho! HHOOOO!" he calls, almost singing to his dog. As the shouts and hoofbeats trail off, the barking chatter of chained dogs fills the near silence.

A Brittany field trial is organized into various categories of competition with each category judged in heats, called "braces." A brace is comprised of two dogs, their handlers, two judges and two field marshalls who help find the dogs or keep spectators out of the way. A dog that has a good reputation can sometimes draw dozens of people to watch it run.

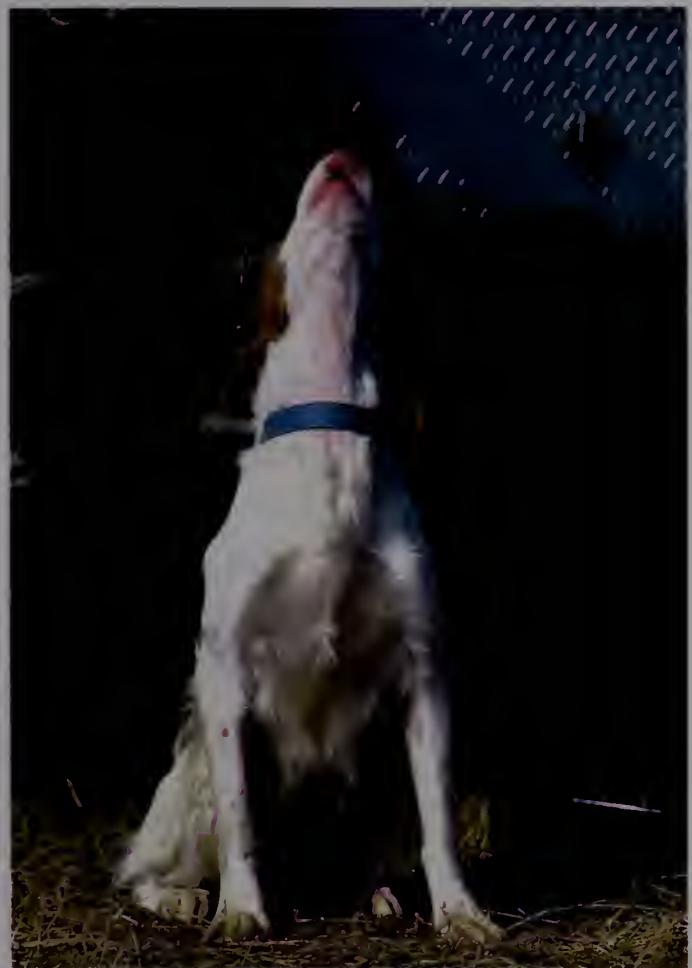
The brace takes place over a predetermined course that can be a mile in length through the fields. The dogs, searching for quail, are judged on their ability to locate a bird and hold a point. The handler then flushes the bird before the motionless dog is released from point.

Most dogs are trained and handled by their owner. For a fee, usually in the range of \$150 a month, an owner can have his dog trained by an expert. So, a field trial has become a mixture of amateurs and professionals, as both do their best to show off their dogs.

"Being a professional trainer is like being a salesman," said one amateur trainer in the process of going professional. "The more famous you are, the



*Brittany field trials combine puppies, horses, birds, and good dogs. What could be more fun?*



more money you can make." And the more field trials a trainer wins, the more famous he becomes.

The competition that has developed in field trials has created some criticism. Some believe that field trials, because of the competition factor, do not accurately create the pressures and conditions of a hunt. In other words, some believe that a field trial rewards the best field trial dogs and not necessarily the best hunting dogs. Field trials, they say, have lost their original purpose in the refinement of the competition over the years.

Regardless of the arguments, the opportunity for one to win fame or fortune from cherished furred charges has strong appeal to many. Although, by the time one calculates the amount of money and energy expended by the average owner to have a champion dog, fame and not fortune becomes the more motivating force. Then, there is another factor: the old-fashioned fun one has when working a good hunting dog. What else could make a man drag his wife and kids from New Jersey, Kentucky or who-knows-where to a cold, wet miserable weekend in Virginia far from the nearest Holiday Inn? Or make a person give up a good paying job to start a new career? After all, no one becomes a millionaire hunting or training Brits.

Six mounted horses follow two dogs during one of the last braces of the day as the dogs race down a treelined draw. Almost immediately a dog goes on point. A well-known owner/trainer who is doing his own handling, rides towards his pointing dog with an almost smug expression.

Suddenly, the quail being pointed flushes, flies inches off the ground and streaks back up the trail past the horsemen. The Brit, forgetting all his training, breaks point to chase after the bird. The owner rears his horse to a quick halt hollering "whoa!" towards the running Brit. Intent on the bird, the dog ignores his owner, running by him. "Whoa!" repeats the owner, now standing in the saddle.

The owner kicks his horse into a full run chasing the frantic Brit, "Whoa, Daggumit!!" The horse catches up to the errant Brit just as the quail settles in



*Top: Even the editor gets out in the field sometimes. Virginia Shepherd and her feisty new French Brittany pup picked up a few training pointers at the Amelia field trial. Above right: When each brace is loosed, the dogs are gone. Then it's up to the handlers to keep up with them. Right: A soaked Brittany gets a little lovin' in between braces.*



some nearby brush. As the owner comes to a halt near the dog, the bird flushes again, flying to a patch of high weeds. The Brit, to the consternation of his owner, responds by continuing the chase. Both instantly disappear into thick brush.

"Whoa, WWHOOAAA!!!" cries the owner. He spurs his mount into the weeds after the Brit.

The dog, having failed to follow rules or commands, is disqualified and not allowed to continue. It is "picked up" and rides in the saddle with the owner as they return to the starting line. One can almost hear the owner mumbling at the dog. But the Brittany doesn't seem to mind. He glances back where he last saw the quail, tongue hanging out, with what looks like a smile on his red lips.

As the sun begins to set, and the final brace comes in, a stubborn fire made back at the compound finally blazes up bright. A cheerful crowd quickly gathers around seeking to ward off the evening chill.

"There's some Henry McKenna in there. You want a bourbon and coke? . . . you already got a coke."

Potfuls of homemade Brunswick stew are served, oysters steam on the fire. Pocket knives soon glint in the light of a single bulb as the oysters are popped open, and into mouths between fits of laughter.

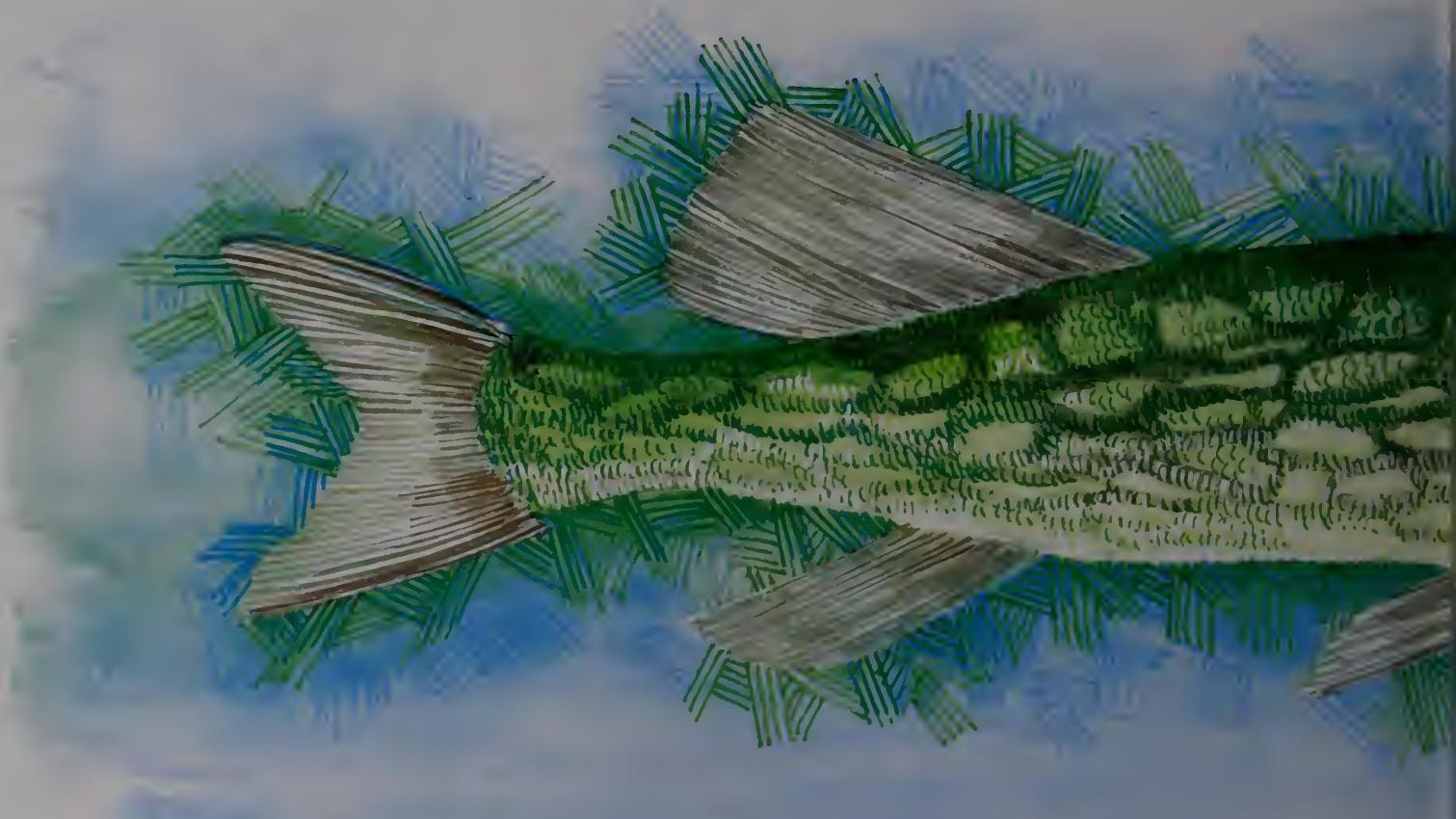
By 8:30 p.m., the long hours of exertion begin to take their toll. The laughter and joking dies down, the crowd begins to thin. Those that can, go home. Some head for hotels. The rest hang around the fire to finish the oysters and beer before retiring to their tents or campers.

Having seen two days of Brits working the fields, watching them return with their ribs heaving and tongues practically dragging on the ground, listening to the owners and handlers praising or condemning them or each other, one begins wondering about that argument on field trial competition. The real competition, it seems to me, is who has the most fun in search of those elusive birds: the man or his dog. □

*Tim Wright is a freelance writer and photographer living in Richmond.*

# A Most Honorable February Fish

The chain pickerel gives fishermen a reason for living in February. It may be a mean-looking cuss with a mouthful of teeth and bony to boot, but it sure does make February bearable.



by Steve Ausband

The reason February has only 28 days is that nobody could stand any more of it. I was involved once with a group of activists who tried to get the month shortened to 14 days (the remaining two weeks to be portioned out to November and May—to coincide with the arrival of ducks and bluefish, respectively), but the group ran afoul of federal regulations on account of the number of presidents'



## *"Viewed head-on, a jack looks like an alligator with severe orthodontic problems."*

birthdays we would have done away with. There was quite a bit of hostility, (virtually all of it coming from people who had no appreciation of the outdoors, as far as I could tell), and I got out of the group before my name was included among a list of characters to be investigated by the FBI.

I was born in February. A few decades later I got married in February. Aside from those two events, Februaries have been pretty inconsequential. In February, sometimes, the forsythia blooms—usually right before a major ice storm. By late February the world is all lead-gray sky and muddy fields and a cold wind with no ducks in it. The month was invented to try the soul. Bass won't bite for another 30 days, the deer season is a distant memory, and the last duck decoy has been put so far back in the utility room closet that even the new Labrador puppy can't drag it out and chew on it. It's an in-between time, when everything seems dormant. True, you can sometimes whistle up the dogs and find a quail or two, but the dogs and even the birds seem to know by late February that the season has pretty well run its course. It is late winter, the death of the year, a time for waiting and remembering. At least it used to be before I found out about pickerel.

Most Februaries in my part of Virginia have at least a few warm days in them, and with any luck at all I can usually find a fish then. Chain pickerel (also called jacks, pikes, or jack-fish) like swampy lakes and streams and seem to be particularly abundant in the acidic waters of southeastern Virginia, where they share the habitat with the smaller redfin pickerel. They can be found almost everywhere in the state, even in the mountains, but I always associate them with cypress knees and dark, tea-colored water. They look like miniature muskellunge or a Dixie ver-

sion of northern pike, but they do not enjoy the wide esteem that their larger, northern counterparts do. They are almost always hungry, even in February, and that is reason enough for celebration as far as I am concerned.

**I**magine most pickerel are caught by bass fishermen in the warm months. That's a pity, since it is hard to appreciate the fish when there are bass to be caught. I think it's partly a matter of expectation. Handsome as the pickerel is in profile, with its striking markings and its green hide and obvious strength, the sight of all those teeth unnerves some people. Viewed head-on, a jack looks like an alligator with severe orthodontic problems. There are teeth everywhere. They aren't even in nice orderly rows, like the teeth of a shark. As far as I can tell, there is no planning evident in pickerel dentition. "Gimme a mouth full of teeth," the first pickerel must have ordered. He got it. Now a beak full of needles is somehow more unnerving when you are expecting a more civilized mouth, like that of a bass. This is particularly true if you are in the habit of sticking your thumb into the mouth of the bass and hauling the fish aboard. In February, I don't expect to catch many bass. If I do, I regard each fish as a lucky accident, and I go back to looking for chain pickerel. I appreciate jacks in cold weather, and I keep my thumbs to myself.

Bass fishermen usually revile pickerel because the fish will gleefully ambush a spinner bait or topwater plug intended for bass. I remember the first pickerel I ever caught when I was a kid. I was plugging for bass when something big and feisty smashed my lure, rolled on the surface, and headed for a cypress stump. I got it away from the stump and into the boat, where it wriggled out of my grip and thumped

on the floor. It was a hefty, three-pound fish, with a white belly and white chain markings on its dark green back and sides. My fishing companion (a more discerning and specialized type than I) snorted, "Huhn. A jack." Then he picked up my fish (my fish!) and threw it back into the water. I was torn between throwing away all his fish and just throwing him into the water, but he seemed utterly without malice. I hesitated, sputtering uncertainly as I looked from it to his stringer and tried to decide which would have to leave the boat.

"You threw away my fish," I said. This was before the Clint Eastwood movies, but I scowled as threateningly as I knew how back then. I thought I looked pretty mean, for a skinny teenager. My companion seemed unimpressed.

"Jacks. All bones. You can't eat 'em and they get in the way all the time. Sometimes I think they're more jacks than anything else in this lake. I hate 'em."

"Oh," I said. It was not my first introduction to fish prejudice. I grew up around salt water, and I hated sharks when I was fishing for blues and hated blues when I was fishing for trout. It had not occurred to me that my distinctively marked fish was from across the tracks, so to speak, and I looked sort of wistfully at the ripples on the surface where Luther had pitched the thing back into the water. I decided that I would eat the next one I caught, and if Luther touched it I'd smack him with an oar.

Luther was right about one thing. Jacks are boney. I have run into a few guys so clever with a fillet knife that they can get passable fillets out of a pickerel with just a few strokes, but for me the job demands patience. The fish is full of tiny bones, and the first one I ever ate tasted like a fish-flavored bris-

tle brush. In February, though, I am delighted to catch any fish, and if the fish requires some extra work before it's ready for the frying pan . . . well, what else does one have to do in February?

Jacks like cover. They like to hide at the edges of weedlines or around tangled roots and stumps, and they make short, explosive grabs at anything that swims too close to the shadows. You won't find them very far from cover; they are not going to chase a plug halfway back to the boat. They like thick growth at the edge of moderately shallow water, often very near the shoreline, and if you can find a likely spot you can probably get a strike. There is nothing very subtle about a jack. If a lure looks remotely like a meal, and if it's not too far away from his shadows, he'll pounce on it and try to kill it.

They eat anything—mice, snakes, frogs—but they show a preference for minnows. I have caught some large pickerel while crappie fishing with live minnows or small jigs, but I have had the most consistent luck in cold water with small artificial lures like the Thin-Fin Shad. I have also caught them on small spinner baits and even plastic worms, but the little artificial minnows seem to be the best attractors. Any artificial allows me to cover more territory than I could cover with live bait, and big pickerel seem to be solitary fish, each one taking up residence beneath a particular cypress stump and attacking anything that swims too near its territory.

Throw the plug close to a line of stumps, let it sit for a few seconds, give it a couple of twitches, then start a retrieve. If the plug almost touches the cover, and if there is a jack with an appetite in residence, the strike will come. If you don't get a strike in a couple of casts, try another piece of

cover. Jacks sometimes sulk the way bass do, and on such occasions they are nearly impossible to catch. When they do get ready to bite, however, they are toothy psychopaths, ready to murder almost anything that passes by them.

Beds of lily pads and other thick vegetation are particularly good cover for pickerel. There is a good chance of getting tangled in the tough roots and stems of lilies, but the reward for accurate casting can be some exciting fishing. Fairly light lines are generally better for pickerel, since casting a small lure with light line is a lot easier than it is with heavy tackle. Furthermore, the light line brings more strikes, I believe. I like a six-foot spinning rod with six or eight pound line, but it is possible to go lighter if you're willing to risk an occasional break-off in weeds or around a root system.

Any body of water that contains largemouth bass will probably contain at least a few pickerel as well. My favorite spot in south-central Virginia is in Lake Gaston, especially along stump and weed-filled streams that feed into the lake and marshy flats outside the main channel. Allen's Creek has been particularly productive in years past. The Hyco River near Kerr Reservoir (Buggs Island Lake) is also a good winter pickerel hangout.

The biggest pickerel I have ever caught came out of the Hyco. Some of the tributaries of the James, especially the little blackwater creeks east of Hopewell, have good populations of pickerel. Perhaps the very best spot, however, is a beautiful little coastal plains stream called the Northwest River. It also may be the most scenic, albeit a little hard to reach. It's in the extreme southeastern corner of the state, between Highway 17 and Back Bay, and it threads its course along

both sides of the Virginia-North Carolina line. Cypress-lined and tranquil, it seems almost impossibly remote for a stream so close to population centers like Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Access is limited to a few small ramps, the best one lying in the North Carolina stretch of the river. Some of the land around the river looks the way it did when William Byrd surveyed the line through the Dismal Swamp, and even if you don't catch a fish, the scenery makes the trip memorable.

I have caught chain pickerel when there was ice on the fringes of the shoreline. I have caught them when there was ice in the guides of my rod. I have read of people who fished for them through holes cut in the ice of frozen lakes. (That's too exotic for me; my Southern blood jells at the thought.)

My best pickerel days, though, are those tantalizing sunny ones in late February or early March, when the wind that has been bitter for a week suddenly slacks off, the sun comes out, and it seems as if spring might really someday come after all. I listen to the weatherman very closely then. If he promises another day or two of respite from the wind and the cold, I can feel my spirits begin to lift. It will be weeks yet before the sun begins baking the chill out of the earth and water, but those few warm days in February and March are a promise, a hint of the life to come. I start cleaning out the tackle box and checking the equipment I had put away in the fall. "It won't be long," I think. Then I remember that there exists a fish almost as anxious as I am get the show on the road. I pick a few slender plugs from the junk heap at the bottom of the tackle box, hitch up the boat, and start the fishing season. □

Steve Ausband is the chairman of the English department of Averett College in Danville, and is a frequent contributor to Virginia Wildlife.

*by Bruce Ingram*

# A Sporting History: Craig County

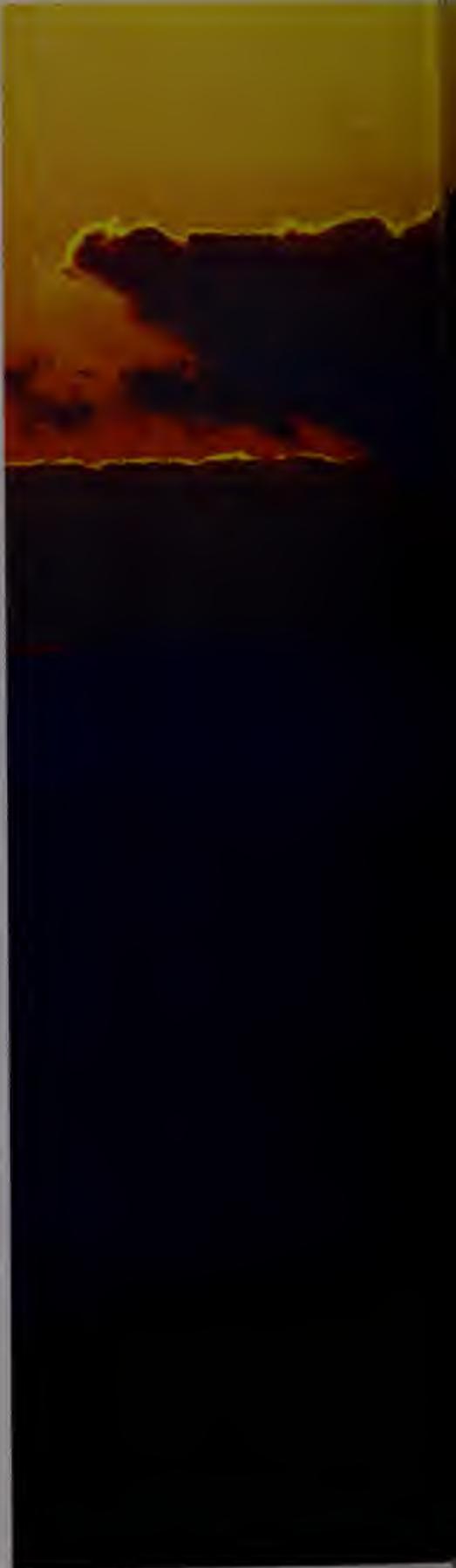
**T**oday, in Virginia, every county in the state has its storytellers—men and women who are steeped in the sporting traditions of their areas. And one of the pleasures in life is to hear them weave their yarns.

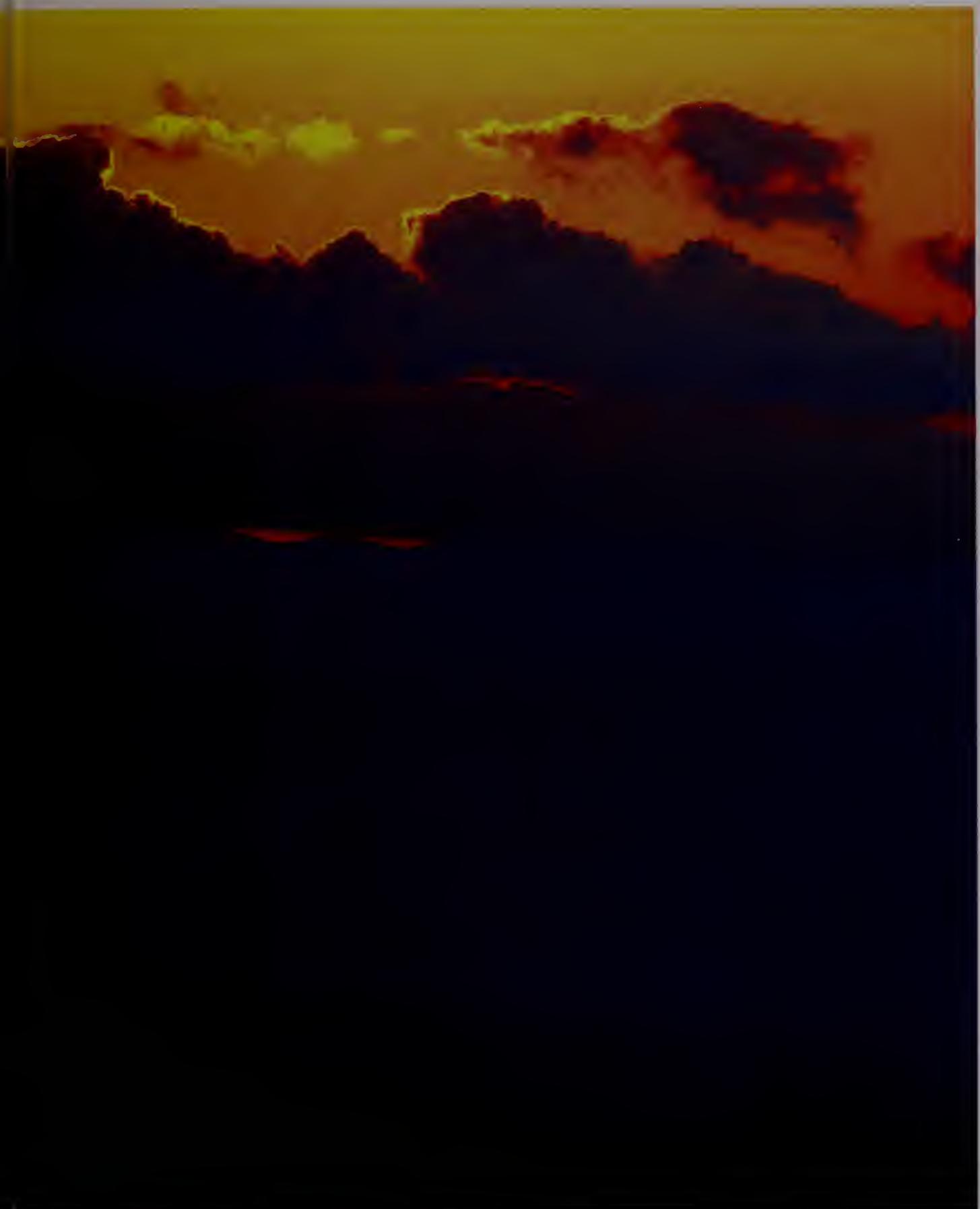
Minor Keffer, age 76, and Theo Grisso, age 80 have hunted and fished in Craig County most of their lives. Mr Keffer has operated a general store in Catawba for 53 years, the last 46 in the same location. Mr. Grisso has worked for the highway department and driven a school bus, but mostly he has always been a farmer. Here are their reminiscences of long ago days spent hunting and fishing in Craig and Catawba.

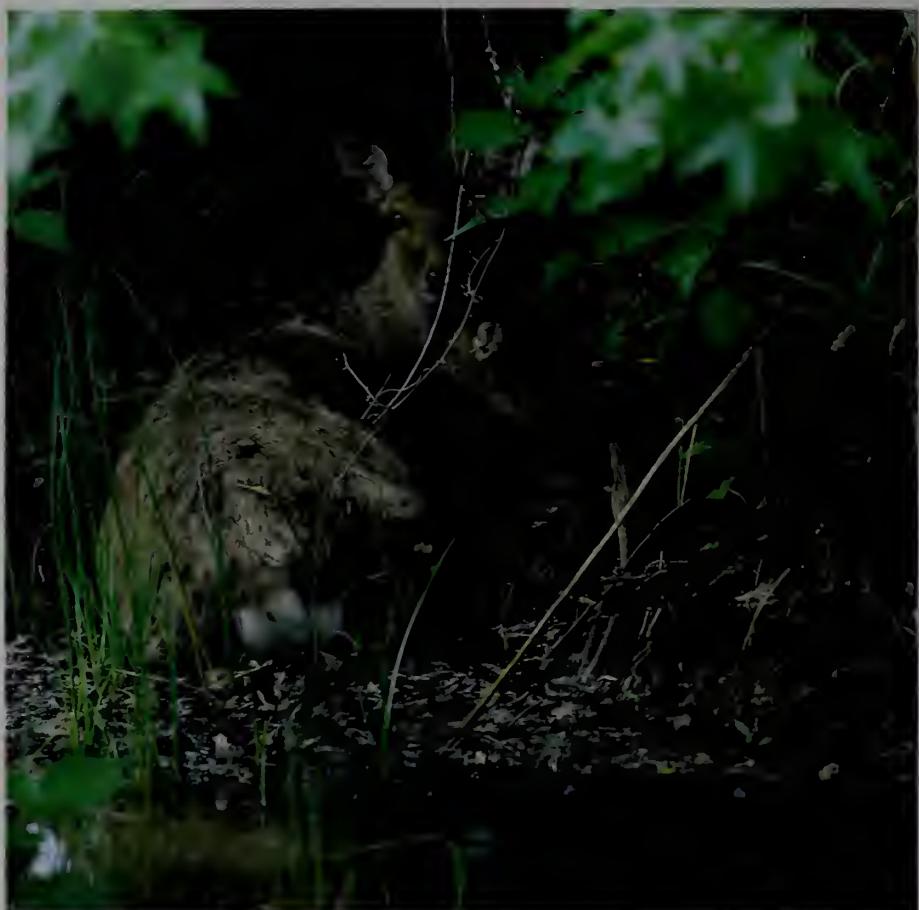
"There's a lot of difference in the fishing today, I can tell you that—particularly the trout fishing," said Keffer. "Used to be when you were trout fishing on a stream and you came upon a man fishing, you got out and walked around him and he would treat you the same way. Now they just wade on through your hole. People aren't as polite and the crowds are much larger, and you just don't get the pleasure out of it today that you used to."

"I don't know whether it's because

*Blue Ridge country; by Lynda L. Richardson*







It was a different time back in the "good old days." Less deer, more rabbits and plenty of open space. There's still some of that country left up in Craig County. Clockwise: White-tailed deer by Lynda L. Richardson; a forest fern by Lynda L. Richardson; a white-tailed buck by Steve Maslowski; and a cottontail rabbit by Gregory K. Scott.

there are more people or that they just don't respect the other fellow or what. Back in the late 1930's and early 40's, I think the limit was 20 trout a day. They had trout stocking back then and you could get your limit of the stocked fish. There were some streams that still had natives, but you never got your limit of them. The natives were mostly speckled trout (brook trout). I'd fish Barbour's Creek and Cove Branch in Craig. The natives weren't big, but they sure were pretty."

Theo Grisso was known in the area as a good deer hunter and he recalls his

first one.

"I got my first deer on my 21st birthday. I thought I had really done something; it was a spike buck. I think that was the last or the next to last year that you could run deer with dogs in western Virginia. That was 1927."

"You know," interjected Keffler, "back then they (the Virginia Game Commission) had to close the season on deer for a few years—there were so few of them. They actually had to stock deer in Craig County. They went and got some deer from Pennsylvania or Michigan, the best I can recall. My

father gave fifty dollars on that deal so that we could get those deer stocked."

"Yeah, that's right," continued Grisso, "deer were mighty scarce at one time. You might only see one or two in a week's hunt. Sometimes there weren't any tracks for you to put the dogs on. Oh, gosh, there are 25 deer today for every one that there was back then."

"You know, I'd love to see our old hunting camp again. We'd drive over in an old Model T. on a dirt road that's now Route 311. After we got off 311, we'd put our gear on a horse and



wagon and haul it as far as we could toward the camp. Then we'd have to haul the gear ourselves the rest of the way to the cabin. It was a makeshift cabin with a dirt floor and enough room for a half dozen beds.

"A lot of people went out and killed those stocked deer illegally. Not everybody, of course, but some did. That's one thing that I can say that I never did—I never killed a deer illegally. I've killed 16 deer—15 bucks and a doe. I have always been ashamed of myself for killing that doe even though it was doe day. We just needed the meat."

"All the small game used to be more abundant," said Keffer. "The quail, rabbits, and squirrels all used to be more of them. Every brush pile that you would shake, a rabbit would run out from it. Now, the danged coons are all over the place; there's more of them today. They are all in the gardens. There's more deer than rabbits. And when I was a boy, you hardly ever heard of a wild turkey being around; there were just a few."

Fishing has also been a long time tradition in Craig County as Minor Keffer can attest.

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"I have caught some beautiful pike (chain pickerel) in John's Creek," he said. "I have a wonderful friend up there. He used to say 'keep all the bass and redeyes (rock bass) that you want but turn my pike loose.' There were always a lot of pike in Craig's Creek, too."

"Sixty and 70 years ago we used to gig eels, too," said Grisso.

"You know what I did the other day? I gave my old gig to two of my grandchildren," said the country store owner. "We used to catch a lot of frogs. But the danged coons are catching all my frogs, today. Theo's right about the eels. We used to go down to the creek at night and Dad would have pine torches at different places along the bank so that you could see to gig.

"You want to know how to kill an eel? Get sand on your hands real good so that you can hold him. Then crack his tail on a rock. You think I'm lying don't you? But eels are slick and they will bite you. I've killed a many of them that way. Dad would say: 'Don't beat his head, crack his tail.' If you aren't careful, eels will get down on the ground and flop away like a snake. You got to skin them before they get cold; eels aren't fit to eat after they get cold."

"Eels aren't around any more," said Grisso. "I think it's because of all them dams. They can't get over the dams to get here (Craig in in Southwest Virginia). I miss eating the eels, the flesh was so white and good. I loved going out at night and taking eels home in a sack. You wouldn't get home 'til morning."

"Well, boy," said Keffer. "I hope you got enough bull to do you, 'cause that's about all I've got to tell you for now."

There are many similar stories waiting to be spun in counties across the Old Dominion. Here's hoping that you have the opportunity to listen to some of them. □

Bruce Ingram is the Virginia editor for *Outdoor Life* magazine and a frequent contributor to *Virginia Wildlife*.

## New Rates Stand Firm

O.K., you guys. We've given you seven months to get our new *Virginia Wildlife* subscription rates straight. Granted, we've made a few goofs ourselves in forgetting to change the rates on the brown wrapper covers your magazine comes in when your subscription is getting ready to expire. But, enough is enough. Goofs or no goofs, the subscription rates to *Virginia Wildlife* stand firm at \$7.50 for one year, \$18.00 for three years. If you order 10 or more subscriptions, you get them for four bucks apiece.

Please don't send in anymore subscriptions at the old rates. We simply won't accept them, and you'll end up getting your check returned along with a nice letter saying that you need to send us more money. Please understand that we aren't making one red cent on any of your subscriptions. In fact, we're still losing money—even at the new rates. But, we figure that the information we pass on to you is worth it. And we hope that the sportsmen of this state, who are subsidizing the magazine, think it's educational money well-spent. □

## Letters

### Hunter Safety

Mr. Word's letter in your October issue makes an excellent point on the hazards of wearing camouflage garb in the woods during hunting season. Serious hunters should know that camouflage clothing doesn't really make much difference in still hunting for deer—animals that are color-blind, have poor eyesight and depend mainly on movement, smell and sound to detect the hunter. Everyone in the autumn woods would certainly be safer if all hunters were required to wear orange blazes.

## From the Backcountry

I'm afraid, though, that any proposal to make orange blazes mandatory could cause a fearful outcry. Camouflage clothing may not have much to do with deer hunting as such, but it does seem to fulfill an important need for some: it proclaims to the admiring world that the wearer is a hunter! That's why you see almost as many young men in camouflage clothing striding around shopping malls and fast food outlets as you do in the woods.

Edward C. Ingraham  
Bethesda, Maryland

Please ask readers to consider the following two changes which would improve the sport of deer hunting and the relationship between hunters and landowners in Virginia.

First, require the use of single shot firearms. It would be laughable, were it not so discordant and scary, to hear a running deer's progress along a mountainside as each trigger-happy hunter it passes empties a five-shot magazine at

it. I suppose they like to hear the noise. I don't. It's a reckless way to handle firearms, accounts for a few human fatalities each year, imparts to a venerable setting the aura of a battleground, and makes landowners nervous. The concept of firepower is not valid in deer hunting. Reliance on it tends to be inversely proportional to the quality of the hunt because it is substituted for hunting skills, including marksmanship.

As a boy I hunted small game successfully for years with a single-shot shotgun, holding a spare shell between my fingers for a quick reload if it were necessary. Two shots are enough to kill any deer, if you can hit it, and more than enough to spray helter-skelter around the woods, if you can't.

Secondly, I recommend for Virginia the practice used in Pennsylvania and New York, where hunters are required to display their license numbers pinned to the backs of their jackets. The anonymity inherent in our present system encourage trespass and other unlawful acts. Some hunters would be more careful where and how they hunted if they could be identified in a way not dependent on their cooperation, which is often not given when they are approached by property owners. I own some woods, and though I thoroughly enjoy hunting, I can easily understand why many landowners consider hunters their natural enemies, and dread what they perceive to be, and sometimes is, the threatening, undisciplined, and unruly annual assault upon the countryside called hunting season.

The fine sport of deer hunting would be favorably affected for hunters and landowners alike, were these policies implemented.

Raymond E. Rapp, M.D.  
Weyers Cave

## Cooperation

I received the November edition of the Richmond Audubon Society's monthly pamphlet, "The Thrasher," today and several notations or articles written, brought about my remembrance of an editorial written by you in the February, 1986 edition of *Virginia Wildlife*.

After retrieval of the above edition from a cold attic, I again read your editorial and decided to reply—something I've been meaning to do for many a day, but enough of that, you know what's said about good intentions.

I'm in general agreement with your editorial, but respectfully take exception to your last paragraph, first two sentences: "Because of that, all of us who brag about our membership in Ducks Unlimited, The Turkey Federation, The Quail Hunters Association, and any other sportsmen's group, should storm the meetings of Sierra Club, The Audubon Society, and any other politically active conservation organization—because we care. Yeah, I know it's hard to go in there and have to face a few hard-core preservationists, but I've found it hard to face some red-neck meat hogs, too."

I am not a officer in the Audubon Society and regrettably don't participate in most of their worthwhile endeavors, but would like to relate my experiences in this organization to perhaps waylay concerns some of your readers or you may have.

My wife and I attended our first Audubon meeting in September 1985 and found everyone to be very friendly and open and do not recall anyone inquiring as to whether we were sportsmen or whatever.

Upon reading your editorial last February my first thoughts were of us attending the Potluck Dinner at the previous November Audubon meeting and the enjoyable conversations we had with many members, among them a duck hunter from Charlottesville.

I am a member of The Audubon Society, The Cheapeake Bay Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature

Conservancy and have contributed to the Virginia Nongame and Endangered Species Program since its inception. I believe that membership in both sportsmen's groups and conservation organizations is certainly not incompatible and would be beneficial to anyone wishing to conserve our wildlife and protect our environment.

I greatly enjoy your thoughtful editorials and always look forward to receiving *Virginia Wildlife*.

E.C. Cutright  
Richmond

sport. In the state of Virginia there are probably no less than 1,000 hunt clubs that hunt with dogs. West of the Blue Ridge has definitely not been closed to hunting with dogs because of safety reasons, as was implied in your article. In fact, *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported on December 2, 1986 that of seven hunting fatalities this year, all were west of the Blue Ridge. It is strange none were in the East where the hunter with dogs terrorize the land.

Unfortunately there are unsafe and unscrupulous hunters everywhere.



## Dogs and Deer

In the November issue there appeared an article pertaining to deer hunting with dogs.

I have never read an article so ridiculous and biased in your years of publication.

Evidently the author knows nothing of hunting deer with dogs by "true" hunters. The people I hunt with are courteous, safe and conscious of landowners' property. Even though we ride in the back of pickups, we have never had any complaints of "scared" landowners. In fact, many landowners hunt and post their property for hunting by the group—not to close it. The ones who do not hunt look forward to the annual tribute of venison as thanks for the use of their land.

Also, the use of dogs is not a dying

These people do not need dogs to abuse and destroy.

Please in the future have your authors research their work more carefully as this article is definitely inaccurate in all areas.

The author of this article writes as though he has never hunted and certainly never hunted with dogs.

Steven J. Whitlock  
Richmond

I really enjoy *Virginia Wildlife* magazine's fine articles of hunting and fishing. But I was somewhat disappointed in an article in this November's issue. The article was "Of Dogs and Deer" by Stephen C. Ausband.

It was obvious Mr. Ausband doesn't like the practice of deer hunting with

dogs. It was so obvious that he wrote that article one-sided.

I have deer hunted for many years and I can tell you, with or without dogs—you hear the same amount of shots and see just as many men in fields, on the roads and in the woods. So don't let yourself be convinced that people who use dogs are the only ones who break the rules or cause concern to the locals. People are people and they make mistakes. I hope Mr. Aus-  
band realizes when you argue against one type of hunter you've hurt us all.

David Tiller  
Council, Virginia

We just read your article on "Of Dogs and Deer" in the November issue of *Virginia Wildlife*. We think dogs and pickup trucks with C.B. radios should be outlawed. The deer don't have a chance and neither do the people on the highway.

The road by our farm is full of hunters and pickup trucks. When the dogs chase a deer across the road five or six pickups of hunters are there to shoot it. Is that sportsmanship? Not in my book.

Another thing, the same hunters are out everyday through the season. Just how many deer can one person kill in a season? The season runs too long.

Killing deer for meat is O.K. but after being chased by dogs the meat isn't fit to eat. It is tough and strong.

If a deer is shot and left to die because someone is too lazy to look for it, that is cruelty to animals. If we did that to our animals the SPCA would be after us.

The Longs  
Rice

### Snipe Hunt

Thank you for the enlightening information in October's *Virginia Wildlife* on the snipe. Now I feel better about the hours I spent as a young girl standing in the dark woods on a cool, damp night, holding a bag, waiting for my brother and cousins to "herd in"

the snipe. After "setting me up" in the best location, they headed out with flashlights, lanterns and long sticks. My only equipment was the feed bag from the corn crib. I would call out and ask, "see any?" as their voices became more faint and then disappeared. I finally realized I was alone. Had I waited longer maybe a snipe would have found its way to my feed bag.

Ruby P. Shields  
Bedford

## SCS Needs Volunteers

The Soil Conservation Service is looking for volunteers to help apply conservation practices to the land. A

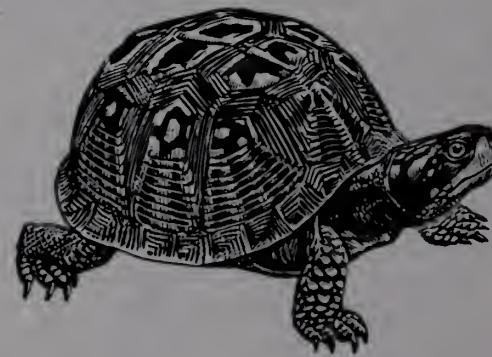
wide range of expertise is needed—technicians, biologists, soil scientists, surveyors, clerks, engineers, computer operators, photographers, writers, and educators. Volunteers must be at least 16 years old.

The program could be helpful to students, professionals reentering the job market, people looking for experience, or anyone concerned about helping the Chesapeake Bay.

Volunteers are needed in all phases of the SCS program, according to Eileen Gough, project coordinator. Schedules can be flexible—a few hours to a few days a month.

For further information on the SCS "Earth Team" contact Gough at (301) 344-4180, or your local SCS office listed in the phone directory under U.S. Department of Agriculture. □

## Lizard Lovers and Amphibian Admirers—Join Up!



If you are mad about amphibians and reptiles, and would like to learn more about the herpetofauna of Virginia, you should be a member of the Virginia Herpetological Society. The group is composed of experts in the field and amateurs, and is devoted to the conservation, study, and care of reptiles and amphibians.

Meetings are held twice each year in the spring and fall, consisting of pre-

sentations of scientific papers and field trips. Members publish field notes and observations, distributional information and suggestions for improving husbandry techniques twice a year in the publication, *Catesbeiana*.

Society dues are \$5.00 per year (\$3.00 for members under 18 and \$7.50 for families). For more information, contact Charles Neal, Department of Biology, Radford University, Radford, Virginia 24142. □

# Afield and Afloat In Virginia

by Jack Randolph



After the Super Bowl weekend, sports are about as exciting as watching the grass grow. It's almost funny listening to an announcer get all hyped up over the national mumbly peg championships or the grand national turtle derby. It's time to switch to a Roy Rogers singalong western.

For the sportsman, February is about as interesting. With the exception of quail and raccoon, the small game seasons are history. Aside from quail, the only wing shooting available is crows or equally inedible skeet or trap. Fishing, however, can be another story.

February kicks off with Groundhog Day. According to legend, if the critter sees its shadow, we're stuck with six more weeks of winter. If it doesn't, spring is just around the corner. The odds are strong that February will be on the chilly side whether the groundhog sees its shadow or not.

Most of us can remember balmy, spring-like days in February, though. I think it was 1975 when February turned right warm about mid-month, staying that way until late in March. We enjoyed the nice weather, but we all paid a price for it. The warm sun tricked the fruit and nut trees into blossoming early, only to be ambushed by a late March frost. Warm weather in February can be too much of a good

thing, if it lasts awhile.

Serious fishermen keep a close eye on February's weather. Three or four spring-like days in row can really turn on the fish by raising the water temperature a notch or two. You can find them in the warmer shallow water on the sunny side of the pond, creek or lake. Down at Bugs Island, some anglers have made spectacular catches of big crappie in late February, finding them bunched up and basking in the sunny shallows.

Farm ponds, being smaller than the big reservoirs, often turn on in late February. The warmer water triggers the big roe-laden bass into going on the prowl, creating some early season excitement.

Late February may also find a few yellow perch beating the main runs to their spawning grounds on the Chickahominy, Mattaponi and Pamunkey Rivers as well as on Aquia and Occoquan Creeks.

The hunter who owns a bird dog or two can enjoy quail hunting throughout this month, but he'll work for his birds. February's quail are as good as quail can be. These are the birds that have survived predators, hunters and the elements throughout the season, and they can be counted upon to play hard to get and hard to hit.

Crow hunting can also be fun if the gunner finds a good location. Electronic calls are permitted for this hunting which can be fast and furious at times.

The eastern coon hunter can continue to hunt through this month. Pelt values will decline, but the dogs can still get lots of work.

This is the first February in which the trout season closed on the first of the month to give hatchery crews ample time to restock the streams for the earlier opening of the trout season on March 21. The season was set forward to the third Saturday in March to take advantage of the greater stream flows earlier in the spring. Our streams flow almost bank-full from December through May. After May, the water levels drop to the point where they are too low or too warm to support stocked trout.

Game personnel will be very busy this month. In addition to their stepped up patrols to guard the stocked trout streams, many Commission personnel will be engaged in meetings throughout the state as they analyze the data obtained from the recent hunting season. The Commission meets in Richmond next month to frame the proposals for the season and bag limits for resident game for the next two years.

If bird behavior were to be classified using psychiatric terminology, the brown thrasher would be schizophrenic. At certain times of the year, this bird sits boldly singing for all to see, but for most of the year it is shy and reclusive.

Despite these often secretive habits, it is a common and well-known bird throughout Virginia. The origin of the word thrasher seems somewhat obscure, but most experts believe it to be a derivation of the European word thrush. Other more interesting origins of the word thrasher may relate the bird's behavior. When feeding, the bird "thrashes" around the ground in leaf litter looking for food. This curious habit is somewhat reminiscent of a bag lady going through trash. At times, the thrasher methodically picks up individual leaves and lays them aside, but typically, feeding is more of a frenzy as the bird wildly tosses leaves over its back as it feeds on fleeing insects. The result is a rustling of leaves loud enough to make the best woodsman think a giant rattlesnake is preparing for attack.

Even with its striking appearance, the brown thrasher is adapted for its seclusive lifestyle. Its rich cinnamon brown color blends in with its earthy-colored world. Its large feet and strong legs allow it to run among the tangle of vines where it feeds, and to jump to catch an escaping insect in mid-air. While its flight in the open seems weak, jerky and erratic, the brown thrasher has great maneuverability as it flies among the dense thickets because of its stumpy broad

V · I · R · G · I · N · I · A · S

# The Brown Thrasher

by Jerry W. Via  
photo by Gregory K. Scott

W · I · L · D · L · I · F · E

wings and long tail.

In winter, some hardy individuals remain as far north as Virginia, but most thrashers migrate to the warmer south. Those that remain are rarely seen or heard during the winter, since they spend most of their time in heavy undergrowth.

With the arrival of spring, migrants from the south slip in almost unnoticed and males begin to quietly select territories. Once the territories are chosen, bold bouts of singing proclaim territorial boundaries and attract mates. It is at these times that the brown thrasher is best observed, as he conspicuously sits in the top of a small sapling, singing con-

tinually. When he drops his elegant tail downward and lifts his beak high to deliver his song, few things can interrupt his performance except the arrival of a potential mate, which he quickly pursues.

The gray catbird, mockingbird, and brown thrasher are commonly called "mimic thrushes" because of their ability to learn and repeat the songs of other birds. Gray catbirds, which are often found with thrashers, are poor mimics, known for their cat-like "meow" calls and short, choppy mimicry. In contrast, mockingbirds are excellent mimics and their often incessant singing contains a repertoire of many other bird songs.

The quality of the thrasher mimicry is not as accomplished as that of the mockingbird, but the quality of its notes is much more clear and richer by comparison. Their songs are often confused, but there is one rule which will usually distinguish the songs of these two species. Mockingbirds repeat phrases three or more times while the brown thrasher usually only repeats its phrases twice, with a "broken record" regularity.

Once a mate has been selected, thrashers retire to dense tangles of briars, wild roses and blackberry along wood margins or in overgrown fields. Less often they may occupy overgrown shrubbery in large yards and parks. Unlike the mockingbird, thrashers are not as tolerant of human activity and are rarely found in small yards or close to human dwellings.

Early in April, in the privacy of their new abode, they mate and build a bulky, loose nest of twigs, plant stems and dead leaves. There is little singing or activity around the nest during incubation, so as not to draw attention to the nest.

After the young hatch, the thrasher becomes a brash, fierce defender of its young, and attacks any intruder to the nest. Many a house cat invading a nesting area has been attacked by an aggressive thrasher. Thrashers will even fly into the face of humans who unknowingly attempt to tidy up an untrimmed shrub where a thrasher may be nesting. □

Jerry W. Via is an assistant professor of biology at VPI & SU and president of the Virginia Society of Ornithology.



